

The Convert

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Simon Ings, a British novelist and science journalist, works in London, climbs sea cliffs in Devon, and walks in Scotland. He tells us he is currently "writing an ungainly state-of-the-nation novel called "The Idealists", and a slimmer, some-what more elegant book about eyesight."

Professor Sylvia Florianopolis didn't particularly care what senses she in-vented, as long as they worked. The medium was all: the message could look after itself. Throughout her career, she had fashioned any number of eyes, each fashioned with complete cynicism to appeal to whatever group she hap-pened to be talking to.

At a fringe meeting during the Kyoto environmental summit, for exam-ple, she said something like this:

"Homo sapiens has evolved to take note of visible threats but to disregard invisible ones. We fear fire, but we treat exhaust fumes—which are, in their way, just as lethal—with total complacency. How different our reactions would be if we could actually *see* particulate concentrations in the air!

"Or hear, maybe, the fluctuations in ultra-violet radiation caused by the thinning of the ozone layer. What if high concentrations of carbon dioxide caused a frightening ringing in the ears? What if the oxygen given off by trees smelled of something delicious—of bacon, or honey?

"If we could actually *sense* more of our surroundings, imagine how differ-ently we would treat our planet! Imagine how much more quickly we would act to heal the damage to our environment! We would then, each of us, be in the position of the astronauts who have looked back upon the lonely orb of the earth, and tell us how very thin and delicate—and *precious*—our world of air and oceans really is."

Very laudable.

Jarvis rolled up outside my house in Parque Lage, beating out a bump-tious tattoo on the horn of his Hertz rental.

"Off we go! A breath of sea air will do you a world of good!"

There was no stopping him. When he opened the trunk to stow my lug-gage there was already a windbreak and a parasol in there, and something that looked suspiciously like a child's boogie board.

"A welcome break!"

A mudslip outside its western mouth had cars backing up bad-temperedly through the Tunel Dois Irmaos. It took us over an hour to get out of Rio. But Jarvis's good humor was unassailable. He wound up the windows against the burnt-sugar smell of Gasohol exhaust, and thumbed a Counting Crows CD into the player. He set it to replay and replay. It was his theme song.

Sometimes I slept, only to wake to some surreal image and the same twanging middle-eight on the stereo. Telephone wires running alongside the road made convenient perches for vultures: there they sat, shoulder to shoulder over the highway, waiting for an accident. Further out of town, school kids squatted by the road beside boxes overflowing with starfruit, sharon fruit, artichokes. By the time you noticed them you were already half a kilometer away—how did they ever trade?

"There!"

I started awake.

"Horse!"

"What?"

"Horse!"

There it was, by the side of the road. It was dead. The heat had blown it up like a balloon. Its legs were locked straight. It looked like a polystyrene model, knocked down by the wind.

"Thanks for that, Graeme. Just watch the road, will you?"

It was good advice. The highway curled past the first village, there was a loud bang, and the car jolted into the air. I hit the seatbelt so hard it felt like I'd been struck across the body with a pole. My head whipped about like a bladder on a stick. The car landed. Graeme's foot was already pumped full on the brake: a reflex action he didn't have time to undo. The car squealed and swerved. Somehow, he managed to control it.

"What the—"

"Speed bumps."

"What?"

"Speed bumps. On a highway!" Jarvis was grimly apologetic. "I saw the signs, I just didn't believe them."

I was too shaken and surprised to give him a hard time about it. Every village had them. They were vicious, too. Even at thirty mph, it was like hit-ting a curb.

To Conor McVaugh—she had no idea how well her words would dovetail with his obsessions—Sylvia said something like this:

"For a long time, we didn't understand how money moved. As soon as the world's money markets were globalized, however, and could be mapped upon a single Reuters screen, we could at last see what we had long sus-pected—how individual transactions trigger major movements of capital from one side of the globe to the other. Downturns, upswings, crashes, booms—in an unregulated global market, money responds sensitively to the tiniest perturbations. Money flows. It spins and dances."

About fifty kilometers out of Rio, the road threw off all its earlier pretensions and became an irregular track, winding between coastal hills. There were no painted markings, and the few reflectors there were stood so proud in the road, they were more of a hazard than a help.

The road had no set width, but pulsed irregularly as we drove, sometimes spreading like batter across the dusty verges, elsewhere reduced to a single lane by mud-slips and encroaching vegetation.

Even the villages had a here-today, gone-tomorrow feel. Columns of soot and smoke rose up from the dense forest like the signatures of charcoal-burners. Only the silvered crowns of the chimneys revealed the actual na-ture of the smoke: a cementation plant here, a refinery there.

Jarvis's driving had become so circumspect since the speed bump, that I hardly noticed how draggy the car was getting. Finally, he announced we had a flat. We pulled to the side of the road.

We got out. The sun stung my delicate eyes.

Jarvis emptied the trunk and put up his parasol.

"Graeme—?"

"There you go."

It was yellow with green piping—the colors of the Brazilian team—and every panel had a posterized image of a player on it: Santos, Assis, Sissi...

"Thanks," I said, sinking cross-legged into the circle of shade.

Even through RayBans, my eyes took time to adjust. I stared away from the sun, across the narrow

valley we had climbed. At the valley mouth, a town came slowly into focus—a handful of breeze-block cubes separated by wide dirt thoroughfares. A stream, rushing down through obscuring vegetation, emerged at the edge of the town, and was canalized through a storm drain. Old men sat fishing on the banks. You'd be lucky to catch anything as large as a sardine from a stream that tiny. But for those who had nothing, this was as restful and dignified a way of obtaining food as any other.

I watched in silence, a little disconcerted. I had spent so many weeks now fixated upon the urban rich, Rio's players, its movers and shakers. Now, confronted with these men who had no money to make them shine, I saw them as mere shadows, or flat cut-outs.

No money-glow broiled like a living tattoo across their lined black faces. No sparks leapt from their skin. Unaccommodated men, they were invisible to my new organs of sense.

They hardly moved. Patient, old, they seemed as vegetable as the trees. How well they suited the dusk, the dull brown earth, the dull brown water!

The hunt for Conor McVaugh had consumed Professor Sylvia Florianopolis; it was the dominant trope of her bizarre and checkered career.

Sylvia had launched her personal odyssey from Tufts University in Massachusetts, a front-row, hand-in-the-air, apple-for-the-teacher groupie of the celebrated philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett. Dennett, you must understand, is an American. American philosophers talk of the mind as though it were a machine. It's not that they lack poetry. But they are the products of an automotive culture, and consequently they get nervous around things they can't take apart and fix.

(Sylvia dreamt. Fuel injection. A fatter exhaust pipe. Zero to sixty. A brain in a bucket-seat. Consciousness on a competition ride-pack.)

At the time of writing, Dennett is director of the Center for Cognitive Studies. Dennett wrote *Content and Consciousness*. Dennett knows what a metaphor is; he knows when something stands in for something else.

Sylvia didn't.

(That's what a teacher finds so galling: it is the things his students misconstrue that lead them by strange paths to greatness.)

Sylvia Florianopolis graduated, made a drunken pass at the great and greatly bemused man, and, snubbed and embarrassed, applied elsewhere for her postgraduate studies. She left Tufts determined that if the brain were a machine, she would be the first to bolt on some tasty accessories.

She came to London and lectured for a while at King's College. (I missed her by three years.) She told me once that the train home to her digs in Crystal Palace took her through a junction raised on low brick arches. Below, in the Y formed by branching lines, lay a Cosworth engine shop, botched together out of breeze blocks and corrugated iron. Fortysomething boy racers went there to have their Ford Escorts breathed upon. A sign on the roof of the workshop, level with the train windows, read: "COSWORTH: satisfy-ing your lust for power."

It was sundown by the time we reached Mangaratiba, with just time enough to board the last ferry. The resort island of Ilha Grande is too small for vehicles, so Graeme drew us up in the long-stay parking lot. We tottered as best we could to the quay, laboring under the weight of our bags. A crowd of locals and backpackers was just starting to board.

Graeme and I stretched out near the prow. The sea, resting in the lee of the island, was as still as an aquarium. The coast was a series of inlets surrounded by steep, jungled mountains, now green, now gold, now black, in sunlight as rich as the flame of a candle.

It was dark by the time we reached the island. The harbor town, such as it was, was set back from

the beach by a line of upturned fishing boats. On a hill above the town, embers the color of baked apples wove like worms in the trees, and the air resonated yellow, as with the striking of great bells.

Conor McVaugh—my new eyes told me—was already home.

Science is as science is paid to be. Science is a trade. It is not, never has been, never will be, pure. Science answers questions it is paid to answer; that is all—and no one saw the point in paying Professor Sylvia Florianopolis more than a few empty compliments, for a long, long time.

Did she ever imagine that her big break would come from a man whose education, such as it was, gave him no real understanding of her work? What would she have made of her future, had she known that she would be forced out of science's mainstream and made to rely, at last, upon the tender mercies of such a rich but ignorant sponsor?

Or were all her unsuccessful bids for academic funding—her tireless yet mostly vain efforts—merely a blind? A cover, for the enormity of her ambition, as she revealed it to me, that day in San Francisco?

"All of it?" I asked, wide-eyed, my chicken molé cold and congealed, as Sylvia (her "blue" steak oozing blood into her green papaya mash) explained her bid.

"Yes," said Sylvia. "Yes. All of it."

"And what makes you think he's just going to whip out his check book and hand over everything he's worked for his whole life? Be serious, Sylvia!"

Sylvia stared hopelessly at her plate, her fork hand spooling vaguely in the air. It's a gesture you grow familiar with in academe: sometimes, people know too much about a subject to explain it easily. Sometimes, they can't find a place to begin.

"Orson Welles."

"Orson Welles?"

"Think *Citizen Kane*."

"It's a film," I complained, deliberately obtuse. "It's a fiction."

"Kane is Hearst. Randolph Hearst. Hearst isn't a fiction."

"Okay."

In California, the salads swim in low-fat dressing and the lettuce is a complex, fractal nettle-ish thing that tickles the gag-reflex before you get a chance to chew.

"Hearst ended his life a recluse, disconnected from the world he had a hand in shaping."

"Did he have a sled?"

"Think Howard Hughes."

I knew something of Howard Hughes—his physical courage, the curious overdriven masculinity of his films, the fear of disease that would deliver him, at the end of his life, to the wrong side of a sterile cell door.

"The rich don't *all* end up barking mad, you know," I said.

"They all end up in the same place," she said. "They all end up in the same relationship to money."

For the very rich, she said, all things are possible, but everything is not. Money cannot buy immortality, and, however rich you are, the need to choose, and make the best of time, remains.

From McVaugh's height, as from Hearst's, and Hughes', and Gates'—this was Sylvia's argument—all things appear equal. When everything is affordable, nothing seems more valuable than anything else.

When you've nothing to prove by the purchase, a Saab will take you places on a congested road as comfortably as a Bugatti, and why languish on Asprey's waiting list for your engagement ring, when

Stern's is just next door?

So objects lose first glamour, then significance. Value drains away from things, and Time alone remains.

"They all get there in the end," she insisted. "More or less damaged, more or less misunderstood."

The following month, we went to see McVaugh for the first time.

The Boeing 737 redeye banked and trembled, then dropped like a stone through patchy cloud into Denver. Sylvia pinched her nose and blew, to cure the popping in her ears. She stirred uncomfortably in her seat, and attempted to get a view out of the window not dominated by the wing. She had the hunched, belligerent, asymmetric posture of someone consigned against her will to economy class.

As we taxied to the gate, she was the first to stand; she was short enough, she cleared by whole inches the bells, fans, and whistles mounted above each seat. It was several minutes before I could move, and all the time her large, unlikely breasts hung close to my cheek like an affront.

We had the briefest breath of real air as we crossed to the bus: it was as clear and healthy and tasteless as Californian cuisine. Then, in the terminal, Sylvia led me to the American Airlines first-class lounge, her tracking instincts honed by years of seizing whatever scraps of glamour came her way: the glass of warm end-of-term white, the toothpicked departmental sausage.

The girl from McVaugh's private office—and she really was no more than a child—was waiting for us at the door to smooth our passage over the deep, synthetic carpet.

The location of McVaugh's cabin was a closely guarded secret. The girl issued directions to us under plain cover and insisted we memorize them as we recovered over gin and tonics. Then she tore up the map. Jaeger dress or no, she was barely of an age to be cheerleading her local football team, and I wondered cynically if all this cloak-and-dagger business were not some charade dreamed up to flatter her: *"Our great chief's life we place in your young hands!"*

Sylvia lapped it up.

"Have you got it memorized, Tom? Have you? Are you sure? Say it all back to me. No, not here, in the car!"

McVaugh's office had leased us a Cherokee. It felt as big as a tank. ("If we must drive cars as big as this," Sylvia muttered, "why can't we go back to the days of white-walled tires and chrome and fins? I like fins.") Still, we figured that its size was meant as a gesture of generosity: a consolation prize, perhaps, for having had to fly Tourist Class. And after all, four-wheel drive was the norm on American highways these days, with ordinary cars vastly outnumbered by cattle-barred SUVs.

As it turned out, however, the office's choice of vehicle was simply practical. We needed every gear as we churned up past the snow line, and my ears popped once with the height we had climbed, and a decompression headache brushed sooty fingers across the backs of my eyes.

"Are you okay to drive still?"

I shook my head. "We're already there," I said, and pointed to where, among a stand of firs, a man in a lumberjack fleece stood bent over the open hood of an elderly snowcat.

It was another jarring, lurching, freezing hour before we reached the ridge, and the discreet, well-made rock path that led to Conor McVaugh's home-from-home.

That, then, was the prelude to our startling interview.

"What makes a sense?" pondered Professor Sylvia Florianopolis, while opposite her, on a designer couch more expensive than the vehicle she and I had traveled up in, Conor McVaugh—entrepreneur, billionaire, icon of the New World Order—leafed through our photographs.

Something strange happened to McVaugh's face. Something ape-like emerged. The expression was familiar; several political caricaturists had captured and exaggerated it. His frown. His jaw.

I wondered about that look: the unfortunate, cretinous expression that stole over him whenever he was deep in thought. What patterns had that unfortunate tendency laid down for him at school, I wondered? What teasing had he suffered at the hands of his classmates? At kindergarten even? Was this the source of his over-achievement? Could it be that his empire was driven by his need to prove his playground enemies wrong? Men like McVaugh—achievers, visionaries, despots—they acquire their demons very young.

"What makes sight 'sight,' smell 'smell'?"

Sylvia might have handed McVaugh a package of pornography, the way his mouth had set, and the tension had found its way even to his fingertips: I saw that he had begun to bend and dent the photographs as he leafed through them. Hardcore, vicious, haunting: he tore his gaze away from them.

"Briefly," Sylvia went on, oblivious, "there are three components to any sensory perception. First, a physical phenomenon—light, say. Second, a *sense organ*—in this case, an eye—which the light affects. Of course, evolution has been pretty parsimonious about what she lets us see of the world. The human eye is adapted to capture a useful but actually relatively narrow segment of the spectrum. And every sighted animal, according to its specific survival needs, has access to a different bandwidth. None of us—no species—gets the full picture."

There was something curious about Sylvia's style of delivery; her pedantry had a saving, surreal quality. "Every sighted animal" was very good. But McVaugh's own eyes—when we met him, the cornflower blue of a hundred business magazine covers—had since acquired a smoky quality, as though our pictures had stained them.

Perhaps they only reflected the weather. Clouds had blown up from the foot of Mount Elbert, dirtying the cold clear Colorado air. More a glass wall than a window, the north-facing side of the cabin gave out on the sky through a wide, raw-boarded Western-style porch. The whole residence was an unhappy collision between American Country and Scandinavian open-plan, and might have been snatched wholesale from the climax to *North by Northwest*.

"You said three elements," McVaugh reminded her.

"The third component of sensory perception is the brain. Dedicated areas of the brain take the raw data received by the organ of sense, and search it for pattern and order. From that comes the model."

"The model?"

"Your model, my model—whomsoever's—of what the world is like. We only have models, Mr. McVaugh. From the little data granted us, we extrapolate a model of the world. This we call 'reality.'"

Conor McVaugh picked up the photographs again. He pawed through them, clumsily, and came up with Milo, a German Shepherd, his eyes wired to a London University mainframe.

"We wired him as a pup," said Sylvia, "before his eyes could see. Dogs are born blind. We gave him other eyes, and he grew into them."

"The dog adapted to the feed?"

"Quite well."

"Quite well?"

Sylvia shrugged. "We were feeding it weather data from the London Weather Center. Whenever it sensed a big storm on the way, it barked."

McVaugh shook his head—whether from wonder, or confusion, or dismay, I couldn't tell.

"A kludge, I admit," Sylvia persisted. "Bijker's new neuroplastics give better results. With them, we can build new centers in the brain. Brand new optic lobes, for different kinds of eyes..."

Graeme and I made our own way up the hill to the villa. Conor McVaugh greeted us at the door. There was no one around: no secretary, no security.

McVaugh shone brightly, dazzling my manufactured senses. He made us caipirinhas and insisted I stay at his villa on the hill: he was trying to be hospitable.

But it was hard for me to get to sleep with McVaugh, that illustrious financier, slumbering away in the next room, pulsing and tolling like a great yellow bell. And when I woke the next morning, the taste of iron filings on my tongue was enough to bring on nausea.

I focused as strongly as I could on my God-given senses, thinking to suppress my new ones by force of will. But there was little enough for my ordinary senses to take in: a pleasant, white room with cheap rustic furniture; a shower unit in one corner with a plastic curtain pulled back to reveal the water heater: a lethal cat's cradle of exposed wires and Heath Robinson pipework.

From the living room came the stomach-jolting thump-thump of *surda* drums. They were stadium sounds. Graeme Jarvis, I decided. Graeme, and his bloody football fetish! I tried to ignore the noise pouring from the TV, but the frantic rhythms of the commentary wouldn't let me go—every time I closed my eyes I found myself hyperventilating. I tugged the pillow from under my head and held it over my ears. The bass syncopations of the *surdas* played games of counterpoint with my pulse.

Cursing, I crawled to the side of the bed and let myself gently down onto the floor. The shower was a short crawl away. Sitting there, if I really strained, I could just about reach the faucet.

When the downpour became too hot to bear, I crawled out of the shower and left it running so the steam might soothe my dry throat.

I opened the bedroom door.

There was no sign of Graeme. Conor McVaugh was sitting in a sofa chair watching the TV. The front door was open, and in the light streaming in off the dirt road, his exposed forearms and balding skull had the smooth pallor of margarine. He turned. His jeans were faded Levis. His eyes caught the light oddly—he was wearing lenses. "I hope I didn't wake you?" His voice had a creepy, passive-aggressive quality, like Andy Warhol.

I shook my head.

It occurred to me that I was naked.

McVaugh turned his attention back to the TV. Vasco were playing Fluminense. Where was Graeme?

McVaugh sank deeper into the upholstery and slung his leg over the arm of the chair. His toenails needed cutting.

I closed the bedroom door on him and went and lay down for a while. I must have fallen asleep. When I got up again it was around noon. The TV was silent.

McVaugh, though, hadn't moved.

"Hi," he said.

I closed the door again and threw on some clothes.

Two philosophers, George and Bill, meet in the market place one after-noon. It is Bill's birthday—

GEORGE: Hello, Bill. Happy birthday!

BILL: Why, thank you! What's that you've got there?

GEORGE: This? This is your birthday present.

BILL: Really? How thoughtful. What is it?

GEORGE: It's something to help you keep track of money.

BILL: Ah, George, you know my bad habits too well! What is it, a pocket book?

GEORGE: It's a bit more than that, Bill. With this, you will be able to see where money goes. Wherever you are, you will see it spinning and dancing. And not just your money: all money, everybody's money, will be visible to you.

BILL: But how? How can anything possibly trace all of Money's many highways and byways?

GEORGE: I can see this is going to take some explanation—

BILL: I somehow knew it would come to that.

GEORGE: Now stop complaining, and go fetch us a map of the world—better make it a big map—some thumb tacks, and some thread...Excellent! Now, stick a pin into the map at every place where money changes hands. A pin for every shop, com-pany, residence, computer terminal, cashpoint, EFTPOS machine, and telephone.

BILL: That's a lot of pins.

GEORGE: You're not wrong there. Now—all done? Good. Now, imagine a financial transaction. Any transaction. Anything at all.

BILL: All right, then. Now, let's see: a phone call to Blooms-R-Us from a dutiful daughter in Wolverhampton, ordering flow-ers to be delivered to an address in Cardiff, in time for Mother's Day!

GEORGE: Thank you, Bill! Now, tell me, in this quaint little scenario of yours: where does the money go?

BILL: From the dutiful daughter to Blooms-R-Us.

GEORGE: And?

BILL: What? Oh, yes, I suppose a fair chunk of it must go from Blooms-R-Us to the Cardiff florist.

GEORGE: So take a piece of thread, and run it between the dutiful daughter and Blooms-R-Us—wherever *that* is—and from Blooms-R-Us to the florist in Cardiff.

BILL: There!

GEORGE: It's a start. You have, it is true, described the initial transaction. But you have yet to show *where the money went*. Consider. Neither the florist nor Blooms-R-Us keep their money under the mattress. They have banks in which to store their profit; they have outgoings—phone charges and such. Mark these routes on your map.

BILL: Wait! I've run out of thread!

GEORGE: What a pity. You had barely begun. You see, Bill, Money does not stand still. It washes back and forth. It trickles down. It spreads and gathers. The task I set you—it can never end! Dispirited?

BILL: I'll say!

GEORGE: Well, let's have another try. Only this time, let's make a map of our own—out of living skin!

BILL: You know, George, a pocket book would have been more than...

GEORGE: Come along, Bill, don't be so squeamish! Now, prick your map with a pin where the Dutiful Daughter resides. Now prick it where Blooms-R-Us answer their phones. Prick the florist's shop in Cardiff. Prick the florist's bank. Prick the florist's bank's telephone company. Prick the telephone company's cleaning contractor. Prick, prick, prick, on and on and on, following Money's spread and flow, until you cannot stand it any more. Stand back—and be amazed. Because you made that map of skin, and because that skin is packed with nerves, your map can *learn*. Taught the way that money flows, nerves can imitate your lessons, prick themselves and prick each other, figure how the pattern shapes until—Sit back, smile, and relax, you've got yourself a model of the way that Money moves!

BILL: A model?

GEORGE: Yes, Bill: a model.

BILL: Not a definitive record, then?

GEORGE: Well, no. The moment you gave off pricking the map, it was no longer connected to what money is really doing in the real world.

BILL: Well, just how good a model is it?

GEORGE: To start with, it was very good. By now, though, it's not so good...

BILL: Tomorrow?

GEORGE: Way off.

BILL: Oh dear.

GEORGE: Shall we start again?

BILL: Third and final try?

GEORGE: That's right. Make a map of the world, out of skin.

BILL: Okay.

GEORGE: Good, now take this enormous bale of telegraph wire—

BILL: Good grief!

GEORGE: And connect all the places on your map to the actual physical places.

BILL: But that'll take forever!

GEORGE: Nonsense. Happily, the telephone and cable companies have done most of the wiring for you.

BILL: Funny sort of birthday this is turning out to be...

GEORGE: Finished? Good! Now. Whenever a transaction is made in the real world, a signal passes down a wire, and jangles the relevant nerve on your map. This means your map will always be accurate. It will al-ways be up to date! It's not just a map now, of course.

BILL: No?

GEORGE: Indeed not. Neither is it merely a model. It's a whole lot more impressive than either map or model...

BILL: Or pocket book?

GEORGE: Or, indeed, pocket book.

BILL: What is it then?

GEORGE: What you have here, my lucky birthday chum, is an *eye*...

There was nothing particularly remarkable about this cottage. It was modest, modern, well-built. It had been erected with a senior police officer in mind, back when the Ilha Grande boasted Rio's Alcatraz-style high-secu-rity prison. There were the usual amenities: a well-equipped kitchen, a hi-fi, two phones. But there was nothing here to suggest McVaugh's status: no Aga range, no Shaker sauna cabinet, no Neotu rugs. It was a place even I might have afforded. It was a disappointment, to be honest.

I went into the kitchen and made some coffee. McVaugh joined me for a cup. He winced as the burnt grounds matted his throat. "They really ought to stop exporting all the good stuff," he complained.

"I thought you had business appointments," I said.

"I cancelled them."

"How did Sylvia enjoy her grand tour?"

It was hard work, by his account.

"Where's Jarvis, anyway?"

McVaugh had consigned Graeme Jarvis to a hotel in Abraão, the island's only town.

"Is he staying on?"

Apparently, he was.

After that I gave up. It was too much like hard work. I trotted out some willing-sounding gambits, but McVaugh didn't seem in any rush for us to discuss my reports, or to settle down to work of any kind. Nonplussed, I left him to his football and his bad coffee and went off into town.

The Ilha Grande was a melancholy place. Its prison had been demolished long since. Abraão, which had once catered to the prison staff, sprawled half-empty and struggling on even the busiest nights. However many tourists the boat brought in, the town had bars and restaurants always had tables to spare. By day, stray dogs slept under the palm trees. Every dog was old. They followed you no matter how far you walked, from beach to beach, from one beaten-earth path to another. They were very friendly. Vivid blue-shelled crabs the size of dinner plates wandered from beach to tree line and back again, painfully, as though picking their way among hot coals. The dogs worried at the crabs as at some old and annoying conundrum: "it moves with volition; yet it is neither food, nor is it yet a bicycle."

Abraão had a pretty stone church. Conscious of my more-than-tourist strangeness, I did not go in. In the square outside, teenage buskers from the north of the country danced capoeira. (It's the local dance-cum-martial arts workout—the Brazilian equivalent of Morris dancing, and immeasurably sexier.) On quiet days they used a ghetto-blaster for accompaniment, but there were usually enough interested spectators around to make a live racket. One old man turned up religiously every afternoon with an instrument like a fishing rod and plucked out the rhythm for them with fingers crabbed by arthritis.

A couple of weeks in—it was Easter Sunday—McVaugh invited me to breakfast at a cafe on the square.

By the time we took our seats on the terrace, the town's brass band was already assembled. McVaugh watched the parishioners gather in front of the church, his smile melancholy and wistful.

The band struck up and processed around the square. The congregation followed. Many wore red sashes, reminding me absurdly of beauty contestants. Four young men in surplices bore a statue of the Virgin on their shoulders.

McVaugh turned and spoke Portuguese to the waiter. He turned to me. "Do you want a drink?"

"I've got my coffee."

The waiter brought McVaugh pastis and a jug of water. McVaugh held the clear spirit up to the sun and clouded it with a little water: a private ritual. He drank a third of it off and set the glass down.

"Ex-correction officers," he declared. "Retired policemen. Restaurateurs. The jail—their whole reason for being here—lies in rubble on the other side of the island. But still this community hangs on, year after year; it still observes its saints' days."

McVaugh was off on one of his *Little House on the Prairie* jags.

"In my country," I said, "we call this magical bonding force 'tourism.'"

McVaugh shot me an odd look. "How are the eyes?"

He meant, specifically, my extra sense.

"You're the only man here they see," I told him.

McVaugh was bright. Loud. Redolent. Pressing. He was Louis XIV. He was the Sun King. He was the sweetest jazz riff the Duke ever blew. He was Hockney's most transparent pool.

Blah, blah, blah.

Sylvia's surgical team has reached into my brain with slim, computer-guided whiskers, and licked her unimaginably expensive artificial organ, like a postage stamp, deftly against my amygdala. There it clings to this day, quite undetectable during any ordinary medical procedure. Even the hole in my skull is sewn

over with an invisible mend.

But were you to ask me what my new sense is like—well, how do you de-scribe sight to the blind?

Quite.

I cannot describe the experience of it, this unique sense of mine, except in the stunted and ambiguous language of sensory metaphor: "seeing," or "hearing," or "feeling," or "smelling." You must understand that these words are merely phatic. The exact language to convey my new sense has not yet been invented.

"I thought this place would be restful for you," McVaugh said. He spoke knowingly. As though he too, in some muddied, intuitive way, could see how money moved, and had to escape such insights from time to time.

Every cent of his two hundred billion dollars! The first day we met him, that's what we asked for. Why should we bid for any less, now that we had come this far?

McVaugh held Sylvia's gaze. This was chutzpah on a level he'd never seen before; in his most outrageous imaginings even, he'd surely never contemplated this.

Was that really a smile playing on his lips?

"A drink, I think," he muttered. He stood up, but his stained and troubled eyes did not quite connect with ours. He asked us what we wanted, and crossed the room to pour.

The interior of McVaugh's Colorado eyrie was pure WASP, more a Ralph Lauren show home than a real, lived-in space. I wondered how often his business commitments allowed him to escape here. For the very rich and the very famous, time by yourself is the most expensive luxury of all.

The bottle tinked against the glass. Scraped. Rattled. I sat up, camouflaging my gesture by making a space for my drink on the low, paper-laden table before me. But my eyes never left him. Had Sylvia seen? Obliging, he turned and poured again; again the bottle tinked against the glass. His hands were shaking.

He was afraid of us.

He turned to us, three glasses wedged safely in his big hands, and tried once more to smile. But there were storms in his eyes.

He set the glasses down firmly on the cabinet—he had to think the motion through, he was so shaken—and, looking neither at us nor at anything else, his eyes blue and formless as spilled paint, he launched himself blindly at the patio windows. He tugged a panel aside and strode out, coming to rest at last against the crudely finished balustrade. A balm of cold air ram-raided the room. I blinked, contact lenses chafing at my lids, and tried to refocus on our host. Leaning there, bent almost double over the beam, there was something discarded about him; something broken.

"Go, Tom," Sylvia hissed. "Tom, you go."

I stood up. I was as nervous as hell. I hunted the room, longing secretly for a way out of this, a door marked Exit; or, failing that, a prop. I lighted upon the bottle. Maker's Mark.

His glass. And mine. And out. Some comic business: jackets, the door sticking when I tried to close it. I couldn't have made heavier weather of pulling alongside him if I'd tried. But he seemed glad of the fleece, and expressed no desire to go back inside.

He said, when finally I came to rest, "You people don't pull any punches."

"I don't think the professor knows how," I admitted.

"Known her long?"

"Less than a year."

He rolled the glass between his hands. It disappeared between his big, thick fingers. He nodded at

the dying light. "Over there," he said. "Shaker Lodge. Daryl Hannah stays there. Brad and Jennifer."

The wind died quickly: an audience brought to heel.

"And there—northeast from the broken point up there."

I turned to follow where he meant.

"Knox Point. Ted Turner's crowd, some minor Kennedys; Michelle Pfeiffer's kids were skiing there last year. Well—" He smiled. "They were learning."

Light had left the valley. Like this, it was a place you could not humanize, could not call beautiful, could not at all connect with thoughts of the sublime. It was empty, the snow-covered ground runneled like the wax of a dead candle, sparsely punctuated with cruel rocks and monolithic, sterile trees. Looking into that valley, I felt the poignancy of McVaugh's predicament.

These snow-choked cuts and scarps: was this the nearest he could come now to an ordinary living?

"Quite a little town," he said, "isn't it? Quite a cozy little community." He made a sound that should have been a laugh, but wasn't.

"It sounds like you've come a long way to find Pleasantville," I said. I didn't have anything against his home, or his need for privacy, or his choice of scenery; but neither did I envy it.

"I thought that was it," he said. He nodded to himself. "This is the best I ever heard."

"I'm sorry?"

"You. You coming here and just offering to *take all this away!*" Something imbecile stole over his face, as he struggled to this new understanding. "That is what you're doing," he said, "isn't it?"

I felt suddenly, absurdly confident. "That's right," I said. "That's exactly what we're doing."

Graeme Jarvis's presence on the Ilha Grande irritated me. There was no reason for him to stay, and no pressing reason why he should go. He accompanied me on walks.

"Is that a wasp's nest?"

"Are we allowed near the prison, do you think?"

"What about the undertow?"

"Oh for God's sake," I snapped, "if you're going to swim, swim!"

He wasn't in long.

"Do you think this waterproof sun-screen is really waterproof?" "What time is it?" "Are you thirsty?" "Do you think they will sell us a beer?"

He had a knack of making this whole jungled, palm-treed, surf-tossed experience about as exciting as a wet weekend in Blackpool. I avoided him.

Conor McVaugh's company directors, looking askance at his plans to sacrifice Money upon the altar of Science, demanded some say in the running of Sylvia's project—if only for the sake of appearances.

Which landed us with the onerous and somewhat absurd task of suggesting how our work might promote McVaugh's commercial interests.

Sylvia got to do the visionary, millennial side of things. The nuts and bolts were left to her business consultant, a dapper, dirty-looking troll by the name of...

Enter Graeme Jarvis.

Over time, Jarvis and I developed a kind of fairground routine. Jarvis would make his introductions, then I would come on behind a backlit screen. This served to protect my identity, while at the same time triggering the Sunday-stroll-through-the-asylum curiosity of my audience. After that, I might perform any

number of tricks with my "third eye."

I only had to "glance" at the audience and I could tell you who was the wealthiest person there, or who held the most senior position. Money was a sense to me now, and the longer I experienced and experimented with it, the more information I could intuit.

People no longer appeared solid to me. They were clear plastic envelopes, revealing vast, TARDIS-like interiors. If I "listened" hard, I could even hear sounds coming from inside them. People who worked in the money markets were my favorite. Inside them, high pampas crackled like tinder, and the sound of crickets permeated everything, legs furiously churning, scraping, singing: a billion insect arsonists dreaming of immolation. Management consultants contained in themselves a dreamy nocturnal reverie: they were very dark inside, with, now and again, the scuffle of burrowing things; breezes rustled the trees like the approach of gigantic predators. Bankers were the loudest and most garish. Their insides were an outrageous canopy cacophony. The complex call of parrots rode like a jazz riff over the cheep of tree frogs. Monkeys smaller than a clenched fist sang arias inside them.

Individuals no more, but in themselves whole worlds, these people sus-tained, in their commercial strut and thrust, whole phyla of financial life—life that only I, with my strange-adapted eyes, could "see."

For the very privileged, Jarvis took the screen away. The very ordinari-ness of my appearance—look, no antennae!—shocked them.

"With this we can vet personnel!" A thuggish woman from Human Re-sources rubs her fat calves together like a bloated mantis.

"Or observe the financial probity of staff holding positions of sensitivity and trust." Surely, he is her diminutive mate, this colorless Israeli, with his loud tie and lusterless fingernails. (Tonight, with the light on, she'll permit his thin tool its necessary investigations, then suck his face off, thin and easy as the skin on a cup of boiled milk.)

"And," says Number Three, "we must not forget to acknowledge the intel-ligence possibilities!"

In truth, Number Three is thinking of herself. She imagines herself, third-eyed as I am, where's-willying a perfect mate from out the crowd, a shining sugar-daddy, sweet-tempered as her pa and just as chaste.

Bland, preppy, virginal cipher, she cuts it with these ogres by talking and walking to the beat. Ten years ago, her every other word would have been "interactive," or possibly "on-line." But fashions change, and she is a victim of, among other things, fashion. "This talent of his gives us the kind of *intu-itive* data I feel comfortable with, ethically," she says. "It's positive, it's non-invasive, it's *insightful!*"

Mantis Woman turns to Number Three and blinks: a speculative preda-tor. Her eyelids seem to work sideways, in the muddled light spilling through the blinds.

"Who knows—?" so Jarvis, the pedagogue, wraps up our little vaudeville "—in the coming months, what our brave pioneer might yet learn about Money, through the strange eyes Dr. Florianopolis has bestowed?"

That, anyway, will do as a taste of my short but brilliant career as Memo-ry Man, Count Mephisto of the X-Ray Eyes, Dr. Conundrum, delver into Forbidden and Secret Arts—or what you will.

The point is, we were content. We had what we wanted. We did what we had to do to keep people happy, and we did it with a glad heart. We were grateful, and—forget the insinuations of the press—we were coop-erative.

It was *McVaugh* who moved the goalposts, *McVaugh* who called for that fatal moratorium. You can say what you like about Sylvia's influence over him—God knows, I'd probably agree with you. But let's be clear about this: *the Ilha Grande was his idea.*

And at the time, it made perfect sense.

You see, we'd been generating mountains of technical data, but these only referred to the mechanics of my new sense organs. McVaugh had bought into the project to know what I would *perceive* through those organs.

And those new perceptions of mine were, of course, no different in kind to what I heard, or felt, or smelled, or saw. They were entirely personal to me, and conveyable to others only by language. McVaugh had decided, there-fore, that he should discuss them directly with me.

During my stay on the Ilha Grande, McVaugh interviewed me about what I had seen with my new eyes; I told him, as honestly and simply as I could, what I made of it all.

Those through whom money passes glow with pecuniary light. Shoppers incandesce, erupt and shower; bed down round home time, white-hot embers, bearing goods, luminous with purchase afterglow.

Every house is lit by money's radiance. Houses are factories where people turn income into expenditure, an hour's overtime into an extra lamp in the bedroom, an annual raise into a new TV. Rent, ground rent, sub-lease, mort-gage, rates, utilities. Consumption soars and dials spin. Houses are mills where sweat is ground to light.

But McVaugh, it turned out, was not really listening. He had his own ideas about what I was supposed to have discovered.

"Yes, but—what has Money *become*, Tom? Give it your best shot!"

What did he want of me? The usual market-animist guff? "I've told you what I see, Conor."

"But what do you *make* of it?"

I shrugged. "It's a kind of weather," I said, "I suppose."

This was one of the reasons his management had taken such an interest in us: Sylvia had sold them on the idea that I would be a kind of weather forecaster for Money.

Mind. Weather. Money. In her highly confidential lecture series to McVaugh's management team, Professor Sylvia Florianopolis had developed this dodgy analogy into the central tenet of a new faith.

"In the beginning, money just jiggled about in people's pockets. Since about the 1940s, however, it's been acquiring a substrate—a physical envi-ronment in which to grow and develop, and, yes, evolve..."

McVaugh attended every one of these sermons. He flew Sylvia about in his private jet. He put her up in the apartments his companies leased for him across the globe, or, where there was no private residence, he booked them adjoining rooms in expensive hotels.

"The environment I'm talking about is the *computer*," Sylvia would say, very slowly, as to children. "The computer is Money's growth medium. Each year we've seen this medium grow more and more solid, more and more in-ternally consistent, until today, finally, we can best understand money, not as a mere system of human exchange, but *as the emergent property of an electronic life-form*. The world's web of servers, data cores, and satellites has become a kind of brain, and financial transactions move through that brain *the way ideas move through you*."

Philosophy 101: Beware the metaphor. Beware especially the metaphor that seeks to anthropomorphize that which it seeks to explain.

And Sylvia was taught by the best; she had no excuse.

I believe she did it deliberately. Not at first—but later. In the end, she knew precisely what seeds she was sowing. And by then, Conor McVaugh could no more have dropped our project than a terminal cancer patient could have ignored the dangled promise of just one more clinical trial.

"Tell me about Money, Tom. What's it like?"

There was no way I could persuade McVaugh that Money was not alive. He had spent too many years stubbing his toes against the markets not to believe they had a character all of their own. And, to an extent, he had a point: whether we think something is alive or not is largely a question of scale. DNA sits at the very core of living things, but watching a strand of it in action is about as exciting as watching a zipper come unraveled. It's so obviously not alive—so how can *we* be?

At the other end of the scale, the Earth seems full of separate things, some living, some not: but from space, you can see how the whole planet works together: how even rocks and air and clouds are part of a living process.

So who was I to say that money—on a global scale—did not pulse with life?

The trouble was, Sylvia had carried Conor much, much further down metaphor's primrose path.

"Conor, even if Money were alive, that doesn't make it *conscious*."

Graeme Jarvis coughed: a modest interruption. "Tom," he began, "might it not be that Money is *conscious*, while not necessarily being *alive*?"

We stared at him.

"Well?"

Graeme had run into us in a gift shop in Abraão. I was looking for some-thing to send to my wife. I don't know what I was thinking of. Maybe I imag-ined that I could pass my long and controversial absence off as an adven-ture, a sudden *wanderlust*, a premature mid-life crisis. "*I found this intricately carved parrot on the Ilha Grande. It'll look great in the conserva-tory. Missing you already. Home soon, T. xxx*"

"Oh Tom, look at the ironwork fish, she'll like that!" Suddenly Jarvis was helping me shop. Jarvis offered his help in such a way as to make people feel as powerless as possible. "You'll need to pack it very carefully. Shall we get some padding? Where shall we get that, do you suppose? Maybe the mainland. We could go to the post office in Mangaratiba. Is there a post of-ice there, do you think?"

I was just about to send him away with a flea in his ear when McVaugh rolled in wearing RayBan shades and tripped over a pile of straw hats.

"Is anyone hungry?" Jarvis piped. And: "Look what Tom's buying, Mr. Mc-Vaugh!"

So now we were eating palm-heart pizza by the waterfront, and Jarvis seemed hell-bent on confusing McVaugh even further. "After all," he tittered, "there's little enough difference between weather patterns revealed by a satellite photograph and thought patterns revealed by a PET scanner."

McVaugh dropped his fork. There was a terrible light in his eyes. "Tom, is that true?"

I knew what McVaugh wanted, of course. It's what we all want, deep down. He wanted someone to come along and tell him that the shape of his life wasn't his doing. He wanted someone to put all the blame for his disap-pointments and wrong turnings on someone or something *else*.

So, at the end of his youth, as he eked out his lonely existence in a series of glorified hotel rooms in the world's most obscure backwaters, as lonely as any hobo, McVaugh had decided to blame Money. Money was his adversary. Money was the trickster who had led him to his present, sterile pass.

He had Money in his sights now. Money with a capital M. The whole dumb, sprawling ecology of it. The creature into which I was plugged.

I read the papers. I watched the news. I knew, now, why McVaugh's "flame" was dying, why the tolling of the great yellow bell was fading in my "ears," and why even Jarvis, presenting his MasterCard to the teenage waiter that night, lit up "brighter" than McVaugh, the richest man on earth.

The press had got hold of how much of his own money McVaugh had in-vested in Sylvia's project.

The stock value of both his companies had plum-meted.

The better known half of his empire, Dreyfuss BioLogic, was soon subject to aggressive takeover bids, and did not survive the year.

The less glamorous, less volatile half—Achebe Holdings—persisted. Mc-Vaugh's supporters praised the swift and decisive action he took to save the company.

He'd sold it.

So what does this make us?

McVaugh's article in *Time* magazine a few weeks later could not have been more ill-judged. He must have written it in Abraão, while Jarvis and I were there. It's full of half-remembered particles of our conversation.

We are mere cells. Money's brain cells. Neurons that all together make up Money's mind.

Could he not see how he was being set up? Did he not realize that it was not the quality of his thought, but his name and his fall from grace, that had attracted the editors? Could it have escaped him, in his dreamy-eyed ego-mania, that media all over the world were waiting with bated breath for him to damn himself out of his own mouth?

Imagine it: Charles Foster Kane builds his opera house, then strides onto the stage *himself and* begins to sing.

Rent a car. Pay into a pension plan. Buy your wife-to-be a ring, your child a Disney hat. Withdraw fifty with a stolen credit card and score some smack. Sell grandma's shares, bankrupt a bank, lease a yacht, buy a car, sell a lawn mower. Pay a phone bill. Money doesn't care. It's just a transaction to Her. An event. A blip. A byte. A "0" or a "1". You can break the bank in Monte Carlo, or pledge your child's nest-egg to a TV evangelist—it's all the same to Money. You're a one, or a zero, there are billions of you, and whatever thoughts you collectively make in Her head, they're not your thoughts—they're Hers.

When I read that, I caught the first ferry and took myself off to Parati on the coast, a few miles west. I couldn't bear the thought of running into McVaugh: his quizzical, expectant smile, his abstruse speculations, his otherworldly gaze. Watching Sylvia's religion take root in him was like watching someone slashing their wrists in slow motion.

On the ferry, I suddenly had this vision of him talking to Graeme Jarvis; Jarvis smiling, nodding, encouraging, confusing him; Jarvis suggesting an-other article, and another, and another; Jarvis taking him in hand and lead-ing him into the sea; Jarvis, baptizing him in Sylvia's new faith.

"Beba Coca Cola" was the instruction stenciled on every table-top in every bar in Parati. So I did, fortifying it with rum and, later, cachaga. After a day or so, I relented and phoned in, to let them know I was all right.

Jarvis wanted to help. Jarvis always wanted to help.

"Fuck off back to London," I said.

Which begs the question, Why didn't I fuck off back to London with him?

It had to do with my extra sense. My money sense.

Senses are more than dispassionate receptors. Every one of your senses is finely tuned to the world of human affairs. Your sense of smell is height-ened by the subliminal odor of a mate. Your ear filters out noise to hear a catchy tune or a voice uttering your name. Your eyes, too, are finely tuned to read the human landscape. There's a gyrus in the brain called the fusiform gyrus, for example, which lets you recognize and remember faces. (If yours ever got damaged, everyone would look the same to you—a

rare but well-documented condition called prosopagnosia.)

But what of my new sense? There was nothing human about it. There was no syntax, no grammar, to Money. It was data, merely—a bestial shriek, a shiver as your nail scrapes down the blackboard, the pungent reek of smelling salts, a blinding strobe-light...(Pick a metaphor—pick any metaphor.)

It scratched me raw.

The truth was, I was afraid to launch myself back into the world of money. I was afraid of it as I have always been afraid of the water, and for the same simple reason.

I feared that I would drown.

So when, a couple of weeks into my sulk, McVaugh contacted me and asked me to return, I did as he asked. The Ilha Grande was full of delightful distractions—I figured one might as well be marooned there as anywhere. Besides, I was lonely.

"Let me teach you to swim," McVaugh said, the day I got back. He was try-ing to be friendly, to mend fences.

"I really can't swim," I said, with a shudder. "My dad tried to teach me when I was little, but it never stuck."

"It's just a question of being relaxed. I'm very patient."

I laughed. "If you only knew how many people have said that to me." He shrugged and drained his glass. (We were sitting at our usual cafe op-posite the church.) I could see that he was hurt; that he was trying, in his masculine way, to forge a bond between us.

The waves slapped my chest.

"Now, Jump forward!"

Drink had laid its load around his belly and his legs, but McVaugh was still very fit. In his swimming trunks, he looked like something out of a Fifties holiday brochure.

I made a sound halfway between a laugh and a shiver.

"Come on!" He tightened his grip on my wrists and stepped back, pulling my feet from under me. I snapped my head back to keep it out of the water and peddled furiously, hunting for the bottom.

"There you are!"

McVaugh had told no lies: he was as patient as a saint.

We weren't alone on the beach. Four teenagers from Abraão were drink-ing Brahma Cola at a wattle drinks stand. Curious, they had come over to see what we were up to and McVaugh chatted with them in fluent Por-tuguese. They cheered and laughed a while, willing me on, then grew bored and wandered away. Behind them, blue butterflies skirted the forest like sparks thrown from a vast, silent engine. The foliage was so dense here, it looked more black than green.

"Come on then, Tom. Try again. Try and kick, this time."

I took hold of his arms. This was my thirtieth day of trying. Like I say, he was very patient.

"To me." He stepped backward.

I clung. I snapped my head back. I peddled. I found my feet again.

"One more time," he said. "Now kick, this time! Kick!"

The big blue butterflies played catch amongst the driftwood thrown high up the beach by a recent storm. A stray dog scampered out of the under-growth and leapt at one, missing it by inches.

"Come on!"

Lying on my back was easier but more scary. McVaugh cradled me, his arms under my shoulders. "Lie your head against my chest. There. Okay? Comfortable?"

I kicked up enough foam, sunbathers in Mangaratiba must have thought that a whale was spouting.

Was this the limit of his ambitions for me? To be his companion, his Man Friday? I felt there had to be something more to it.

It seemed to me that he was always casting sidelong glances at me. When I faced him, I'd always catch the same puzzled, expectant smile on his face. He never demanded anything of me. He bought me breakfast. In the after-noon, we went to one of the island's many beaches—in the main, the ones on the other side of the island, where the surf was higher—and he would body-board while I added steadily to my girth with a string of sugary caipirinhas from the shack at the foot of the dunes.

By evening, McVaugh, obscurely disappointed, would grow sullen. Our conversations would falter. He'd grow weary of my habitual irony, what he called my "Britishness."

"Englishness," I corrected him. "There's a difference."

He'd insist that I say what I really *felt* about things, in the kind of tone of voice that makes such intimacies impossible. (There's no easier way to at-tack someone in conversation than to accuse them of a lack of authenticity: Rhetoric 101.)

These abrasive interviews went hand-in-hand with increasingly generous nightcaps. Whenever he started in on them, I would make my excuses and go to bed.

"I thought you British were supposed to be able to hold your drink," he'd drawl.

"Yeah. Whatever. Good night."

Deprived of prey, sometimes he would reach for the phone. It didn't make for pleasant listening.

"So where's the point in that?" he'd yell.

"So what makes that worthwhile?" he'd whine.

It was like listening to a teenager.

"And that's supposed to add to the store of human happiness, is it?"

Quite what commercial influence he had now wasn't clear. He didn't shine any more: he was as bare and unaccommodated now as all the other is-landers. But, quite unembarrassed, he'd ring up people in the middle of the night and ask the most detailed questions about how this or that deal was shaping up and what moves were planned.

"And how is that supposed to help?"

"And this is something we need to acquire, is it?"

I couldn't decide if he was bored, and felt the need to stick his oar in, or whether he was disgusted with commerce altogether and just needed to give vent to his feelings. Either way, he was as much caught up with money now as he always had been.

"Tom, what does Money think about?"

"It doesn't think, Conor."

"How do you know?"

"Because thought doesn't exist in the abstract. The whole point about the brain is that it triggers *actions*. Real solid actions in a real solid world. Thought needs action. It needs a thinker. Without it, it's just pretty pat-terns. It's just weather."

He thought about it. He said, "What if weather is actually the Earth, thinking?"

That's how it went. Whatever argument I brought along to demolish this folly he was building in his head, he'd simply take it and incorporate it into the structure somehow.

If I'd only left him alone, his folly would have been ordinary enough: a picture of Money as a crafty, malevolent force in the world, like the figure of Fortune in Chaucer and Boccaccio: raising some, ruining others, endlessly and indiscriminately. But I made things worse. Bigger. crazier.

This is why I should have left: because it wasn't the project that was driving McVaugh crazy, or anything that I had seen. I was a latecomer to the process: a witness, or at most a chorus, to his fall.

McVaugh had been crazy all along.

"Just dive into the wave!" he tells me.

Seawater hangs off my eyelashes like a crystal curtain. The world tilts and folds itself around me. "It's too much, Conor."

Conor McVaugh laughs. He looks like a B-movie star. He has the firm jaw, the chest. Only the fat round his belly must go; that, and his clouded, troubled eyes.

"Just dive into the wave and come out the other side!"

"I'm scared!"

"Well, you either dive into it or it comes crashing in on top of you, I know which *I'd* prefer!"

"I prefer getting out."

"Oh come on, Tom!"

The breakers are rolling in five foot high.

"Come on!"

"I can't."

"Beyond the breakers."

"We'll never get back again."

"We can swim round the island to where it's calm."

"We'll burn to death, we swim all that way."

"The current will carry us."

"No."

"Come on."

"No. I didn't want to swim in the first place."

"Tom. Please."

I find my feet and wade out. A wave knocks me onto my knees.

"Tom?"

"Oh, leave me alone."

McVaugh got so sunburned swimming back, that if you touched his skin, it stayed white for several seconds. All the next day, he battled sunstroke.

"You're a fucking idiot, Conor."

He sat on the sofa, refusing to go to bed, so I leant him my duvet for an extra cover and fed him ice cream. God knows if that's what you're supposed to do for sunstroke, but he seemed to enjoy it. Brazilian ice cream is extra-ordinary. They have fruits that grow nowhere else on earth. Acerola—a berry made almost entirely of vitamin C. Cacao—not the nut, but the fruit; it tastes of lychees. Sugar apple. Murici.

"Can I have some?"

"Oh, sorry, Conor."

"You should have come with me," he said. His smile was even dreamier than usual.

"Yeah, right," I said.

"I felt the current pulling me!"

"Uh-huh."

"It doesn't go round the island at all," he said. He took my hand. There were lights in his eyes. "It goes out to sea."

"Want a cup of tea?"

He got up and staggered to the bathroom. "Cheers," he said. "I think I might go lie down for a while."

When the tea was made, I carried it into his room. The floor in there was tiled. The sun only entered the room at the end of the day, and the terracotta was cold under my bare feet.

His Mac was on.

I looked at the screen.

He was connected via the Web to the Space Department of the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. There was nothing much to see. Maybe he was looking someone up.

I moved the mouse cursor to the top of the screen and clicked the History button. It revealed a predictable mish-mash of porn URLs and university FTPs.

I clicked Favorites.

ENHANCED NORTH ATLANTIC AVHRR COLOR COMPOSITE
NOAA SATELLITE IMAGERY
NAVAL ATLANTIC METOC COMMUNITY
CINCLANTFLT SUPPORT
NLMOC
JMV AREAS
NAVSPECWAR

Absently, I sipped at his tea.

"NavSpecWar" turned out to be a shortening of "naval special warnings." All those terrifying-sounding acronyms belonged to nothing more sinister than military weather stations.

McVaugh was sky-watching.

It was an innocent enough pastime, but incomprehensibly dull. What was it to McVaugh, what sea conditions were like in the mid-Atlantic?

"We were looking at all the wrong things."

I nearly dropped his tea.

"Don't you think?" McVaugh came and sat down at his desk. "Money!" he sneered. "Who cares about money?"

"Sorry," I said. "I couldn't resist a play."

He back-buttoned to Johns Hopkins.

"Professor Florianopolis," he said. "She told me once that she had a dog. She plugged it into the London Weather Center. It sensed storms."

"That's what she says *now*," I replied. "You should read the original papers, they're pretty inconclusive. Whatever claims she makes now."

"I have read them," he said, patting his keyboard.

Oh yes. Of course. The Worldwide bloody Web. I went and sat on his bed. My heel caught the edge of a bottle: It rolled under the bed, noisily. I didn't know whether to acknowledge it or not.

"Seeing Money—what a facile enterprise! There's so much else to see in the world, isn't there?"

"Sure," I said.

"What would *you* have liked to see? If you'd had the choice? If me and my people hadn't been so damned keen to see Money?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Magnetism. Air pressure. I don't know. There's so much to choose from."

He drank off half his tea. "Air pressure!" It was scolding: how did he do that? "What if you could *see* pressure?" He sat forward in his chair, hands clasped: every inch the earnest student. "Barometric pressure, the move-ments of the air?"

"Mmm," I said.

"Have you ever gone hang-gliding?"

I shook my head.

He ignored me; he was off on an imaginary flight of his own. "Imagine sensing all that! Imagine seeing the sky lit up with information about itself ! The seas even—imagine seeing all the changes in its motion and pres-sure!"

"Maybe one day," I said: a parent, fielding the enthusiasm of a child. If only there were money enough, and time, there was no limit to the number of follies Sylvia might have led him into.

He wasn't listening. He stared into his cup. I imagined him reading the leaves in the bottom.

"If the sky thinks," he said, "maybe the sea thinks, too."

The next day, we ate breakfast together in the square. He didn't drink. He was very quiet, but he wasn't brooding, I remember: his smiles came easily enough.

I said, "I'm going to go back to England."

"I thought you might."

"I'm sorry we—I'm sorry the project didn't give you what you wanted."

He was gallant: he tried to let me off the hook.

"What did I want?" he said.

I remembered Mantis Woman. "Your staff were very keen on us at first."

His laugh was short and without humor. "They never had the right kind of imagination. They just treated you like this year's gizmo. A forecasting device."

"You know," I began—but I hesitated.

"Go on."

"Money wasn't ever going to be what you thought it was."

He shrugged: "It would have been nice to talk to her," he said.

"Her?"

"Money. Don't you know Money is a woman?"

"You've lost me."

He laughed. "Your face!"

"I never know when you're being serious or not."

"Are you coming to the beach with me?" he asked.

"Okay. What about your surfboard?"

"I won't need it," he said.

We took the coast path; it was a longer walk but the trees shaded us from the worst of the day's heat. I pointed a hornet's nest out to him. He shuddered and walked on. We paused to let a crab hobble across the path. "They get into the toilets in Abraão," he said. "Haven't you seen that yet? Look before you sit."

Then he said: "When I was young, me and my older brother used to torture the neighbors' kids."

The trees gave way to low bushes, with a smell to them like over-brewed tea; then dunes; then the beach. We stopped off at the drinks stand. The woman was there already, listening to her radio. Still, he didn't drink.

"They were French," he explained, cracking open a can of Brahma Cola. "That's why we figured we had to hurt them."

We walked to the surf-line.

"You know those jungle gyms?" he said. "The ones where you can fix the platform at any height? Well, we put that platform about a foot off the ground and we forced the boy to crawl underneath. My brother jumped up and down on the platform, beating it with a stick. And we had his little sister tied to a tree beside the playground where she could watch and I'd wrapped her in burlap and I got her convinced that once we'd beaten her brother to death we were going to set her alight."

I watched him. He didn't say anything. He looked out to sea. Slowly, his face took on a primitive, glowering cast: an ape, confronted by a monolith.

"What happened?"

His voice came from a long way away. "Nothing much. They moved down the road to get away from us. When I went to high school I got friendly with the boy."

I was still waiting for a punch-line. "Did you ever talk about what happened?"

"No. We never mentioned it."

I thought about it. "You didn't set light to—"

He noticed my expression. He laughed. "No, of course I bloody didn't!" We'd been hanging out together for so long, he was starting to pick up the British swear words. "I just remembered it," he said. "I haven't thought about that in years."

If the circumstances had been different, I'd long ago have forgotten this story of his. It was, after all, just a bit of life's shrapnel. Such unfinished stories are common—we all tell them. They never mean very much.

As things have turned out, however, I find myself spending more and more time trying to mine a deeper meaning from McVaugh's non-story.

I live in Rio now, and have come to terms—more or less—with my inchoate new sense. The project lives on, at a much-reduced scale. Sylvia and I have our fairground routine. Companies pay us good money for our forecasts (though "séances" captures the mood better). Mine is, all in all, an unusual and stimulating living.

But I never did return to England, and my divorce, when it came, was processed amicably enough, with Graeme—who else?—acting as a go-between.

(All around me as I write—I see/hear/smell it through the walls of my apartment—Money. Cashpoints fountain and smartcards spill. Petrobras and Banco do Brasil and Banco Economico are ocean currents, deep and quick and treacherous; in Amsterdam Sauer and H. Sterns, precious stones pour from crustal vents, making new waves that, seconds later, inundate Rio's commercial shore.)

Meanwhile, in my private moments, I have been picking away at this story of McVaugh's—this tale

of childish cruelty and ambiguous pardon. Examining this shred of evidence time and time again, I feel sometimes like a paleontologist, trying to extrapolate, from a fragment of fossil, the shape and tenor of a creature's past.

The best I can come up with is how hungry McVaugh was for a punch-line—some structure, some closure, some *meaning* to his life—and how terrible was his disappointment, when life—in this case, as in so many others—failed him.

(Outside my window, on the corner of the Avenida Presidente Vargas and the Rua da Alfandega, shoppers incandesce, erupt and shower. Every apartment here is lit by money's radiance. Houses are mills where sweat is ground to light.)

McVaugh was a man born at the wrong time, into the wrong business, ever to easily accept the consolations of an ordinary religion: he would always be having to make up his own. Perhaps that was why he'd imagined Money as an overarching mind, of which he was a part. And when that, too, failed to provide—well, the world is never short of seductive similes.

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NOAA satellite imagery

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The Book of Waves.

Sky-watching. Sea-watching. From the right distance, everything is alive.

That afternoon on the Ilha Grande—the afternoon McVaugh told me his story—I remember that we undressed and sunbathed for a while.

I remember that I managed to persuade him to keep his T-shirt on to protect his shoulders. And how, after an hour or two, he pulled it off and headed for the surf. He struck out from the beach, and once he was past the surf he turned and trod water, beckoning me. I tried to join him, but I was too weak, and frightened, and I couldn't get past the first breakers. I went back up the beach and had the woman there break open a coconut for me. When I turned round and looked for him, he was gone.

A police helicopter recovered his body the next day.

He had found his current, and, for a little while, the world carried him in its thoughts.

But he was quite wrong about its direction; the current went no more than four miles east. Then it shunned the wider ocean and turned in a long, lazy loop, dashing his corpse with great violence at last on the rocks, three miles to the north of Mangaratiba.